

NOROVIRUS, previously NORWALK VIRUS or NORWALK-LIKE or CALICIVIRUS INFECTIONS

What is Norovirus infection?

Norovirus causes a gastrointestinal illness. It often occurs in outbreak form and, unfortunately, is sometimes referred to as “stomach flu” though the terms “flu” or influenza should really be restricted to a respiratory infection.

What are Norovirus infections?

The original Norovirus, previously named Norwalk virus, was first identified in 1972 after an outbreak of gastrointestinal illness in Norwalk, Ohio. Later, other viruses with similar features to Norwalk viruses, and therefore called Norwalk-like viruses or “SRSVs” (“small round structured viruses”) were identified, cause similar disease, and were classified together as members of the calicivirus family.

Where is Norovirus found?

Norwalk and Norwalk-like viruses are found, worldwide. The viruses are passed in the stool and vomit of infected persons.

How do people get Norovirus infection?

People get a Norovirus infection directly from an ill individual who did not wash his hands adequately, or indirectly from food or water contaminated by the stool or vomit from an infected person, or from airborne particles produced by those vomiting. Outbreaks in the United States are commonly linked to food handled by infected food handlers, by person-to-person contact especially in day care centers and nursing homes/custodial institutions, and from eating raw shellfish, especially oysters and clams that are grown in sewage-contaminated waters.

Who is at risk for Norovirus infection?

Anyone can get Norovirus infection, and can get it many times since immunity isn’t long-lasting.

What are the signs and symptoms of Norovirus infection?

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Low grade fever or none at all

A good clue that an outbreak is due to SRSV is the prevalence of both vomiting and diarrhea in cases, with many cases experiencing both symptoms.

Infected persons usually recover fully in one to three days but illness may be severe in elderly persons who may require hospitalization.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear one to two days after exposure.

How is Norovirus infection diagnosed?

Laboratory diagnosis is difficult and clinical diagnosis is often made from the combination of symptoms (vomiting and diarrhea) and relatively brief illness.

Sophisticated laboratory methods to confirm clinical suspicion are generally available only at laboratories of larger local health departments, the State health department, and CDC.

What is the treatment for Norovirus infection?

No specific treatment is available. Persons who are severely dehydrated might need fluid and electrolyte therapy.

How common is Norovirus infection?

Noroviruses, previously called Norwalk and Norwalk-like viruses are thought to be the leading causes of foodborne disease in the U.S. However, since no routine and easy test is available, the real extent of the disease is not known.

How can Norovirus be prevented?

Wash hands with soap and warm water after toilet visits and before preparing or eating food. People with symptoms of Norwalk-like illness should not prepare food or provide patient care. Cook all shellfish thoroughly before eating. Wash raw vegetables before eating. Custodial institutions need to assure a high level of personal hygiene to avoid person-to-person spread. Caretakers need to increase precautions to avoid transmission, particularly by washing hands frequently and especially before and after patient care.